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ABSTRACT

Throughout Finland the different centers for Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), along with diverse interests of LSP instructors, account for a wide range of LSP curricula in Finland. This paper examines the situation in two centers and argues that any LSP program for postsecondary students who are likely to have professional contact with non-Finnish speakers should include a component on cross-cultural conversational styles. It assumes that a communicative approach to LSP teaching is inadequate unless the function of language in interpersonal communication is included as an integral part of the curriculum. Components that should be included in the curriculum are outlined, such as the concepts of social distance and power. The approach entails giving students resources with which to review analytically and therefore gain insight into features of human interaction that are relevant to the role that cultural background plays in social and professional interactions between people from different cultures. Contains 34 references. (Author/LB)

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CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATIONAL STYLES AND LSP IN FINNISH UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Throughout Finland the different centres for LSP and the often diverse interests of lecturers who teach in them inevitably results in the development of multifarious LSP curricula. This paper is written with some understanding of the present situation at two centres and thus, the arguments offered do not assume a comprehensive knowledge of present-day LSP methodology in the country as a whole. The paper argues that any LSP programme which is for tertiary-level students who are likely to have professional contact with non-Finnish speakers should include a component on cross-cultural conversational styles. It assumes that a communicative approach to the teaching of LSP is inadequate unless the function of language in interpersonal communication is included as an integral part of the curriculum.

The paper outlines what could be included in such a component and argues that this field of study is not solely a matter of passing information to the student in an effort to make him/her more proficient as a speaker of the language. Rather it entails giving the student resources with which to analytically review and thus gain insight into some fascinating features of human interaction which bear direct relevance to the role his/her cultural background plays in interaction with those from other cultures in professional and social settings.

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1. Introduction

> 'In some societies the opening of a plane door is a signal suggesting to passengers that they may get off. In others, like this one, the same signal may mean something else; for example, that armed men may get on.'
>
> (Malcolm Bradbury, Rates of Exchange, 1983, p.34.)

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As Finland continues to develop its international markets, exporting not only goods but also human expertise, needs analyses of university students' foreign language requirements are likely to increasingly emphasise the ability to use language in interactional settings with native and non-native speakers. Some of this interaction will occur through the use of electronic media but a considerable amount will involve conversation management in face-to-face encounters.

The task of deciding which of the many needs should or can be dealt with in the often severely limited time available for LSP at university level is an unenviable one. In the past great efforts have been successfully devoted to satisfying many of these needs. Reading subject-specific texts, listening to native-speaker talk, vocabulary building, and training in forms of negotiation are but a few of the more obvious areas which have been explored.

It should be possible to take any of the university-level LSP courses presently offered in the country and review them in terms of the type of communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) they aim to develop. This term originates from a rejection of the concept of ideal speaker-listener (Chomsky, 1965) in an attempt to produce a linguistic theory which incorporates language and culture. Hymes's original use of the term examined how the language learner acquired four key skills, namely, knowledge of what is possible, feasible, appropriate or what can be performed in a target language.

Approaching these skills from a pedagogic angle Canale (1983) describes four aspects of this competence: grammatical (what is formally possible); sociolinguistic (an understanding of social context, role, purpose); discourse (interpreting patterns and meanings) and strategic (use of 'coping strageties' that people use in communication such as for initiation, re-direction or repair).

Although the emphasis in this paper is towards spoken language and for the sake of exemplification, English, the aspects of communicative competence described relate to the teaching of both verbal and textual skills. Should an LSP curriculum which is designed for learners who aim to use the foreign language in interpersonal communication lack a clearly-defined approach to the development of learners' communicative competence then it can be regarded as inadequate. It is possible that, in the past, some LSP curricula have been regarded as communicative in orientation because of emphases on the elicitation of learner-based talk and the transfer of

information through spoken language. This attitude, if held, neglects the major function of language as a means for developing interpersonal communication through, for example, the creation and maintenance of relationships, negotiation of meanings and sharing of a reality. (cf. Byram, 1988 or Trim, 1983.)

2. TOWARDS A 'GRAMMAR OF CULTURE'

The sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic aspects of communicative competence are in the domain of what could be described as a 'grammar of culture' (D'Souza, 1988). This amounts to a description of the relationship between linguistic structures and cultural patterns. It refers to features such as politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson, 1978), questions of conversational implicature (Grice, 1975), pragmalinguistic features (Leech, 1983), amongst others (cf. Dittmar, 1976) which concern appropriacy and context.

One way of approaching the concept of grammar of culture in pedagogic terms is to adopt the notion of conversational style (Tannen, 1984; cf. Hymes, 1974). This term refers to a way of talking characteristic to a particular group of speakers who share certain culturally-determined attitudes. It is closely linked to the views extensively developed in Goffman (1959, 1967, 1974) in which the rules according to which a particular culture functions influence the ways in which speakers transfer information and present images of themselves in social interaction.

The term involves simplification of a host of complex aspects of human communication. One of the most obvious of these is the constant dilemma surrounding the pursuit of a definition of culture. This is particularly significant when we critically review the assumptions behind conversational style because of the problem of asserting where culture ends and personality begins in the style of any particular person.

However, in our search for ways to improve language teaching and challenge the communicative demands likely to face tertiary-level Finnish LSP students, we have to start somewhere and, in so doing, need to accept a degree of generalisation. Seelye (1978) sums these sentiments up : 'I know of no way to better ensure having nothing productive happen than for a language department to begin its approach to culture by a theoretical concern for defining the term'. Adopting this view is not to be apologetic but pragmatic.

The ways in which people from different backgrounds use language involve a set of cultural and social attitudes which influence how they choose to express themselves. The linguistic manifestation of such expression is often of secondary importance to the perceptions that the participants in a given situation have towards what constitutes appropriate communicative behaviour. It is evident that a person's perception of a participant in a social encounter is not formed by simply understanding the words, phrases or intonation they choose to use but, also by what he/she considers to be the intentions and attitudes of that participant.

In addition there appears to be a commonly-held opinion, in Western cultures at least, that if a person has a command of a language then they will automatically have communicative competence in the way they use it. However, this is often not the case, which is why culturally-embedded rules of appropriacy and style need to be taught to the language learner. This is particularly significant when we consider the tertiary-level LSP learner who needs to communicate with people from other cultures through the English language.

3. THE FINNISH LSP STUDENT

LSP teaching is an integral part of tertiary-level training for students in widely-differing academic disciplines at Finnish universities. Due to economic and political considerations an increasing number of these students will be expected to use English in face-to-face encounters with native and non-native speakers. At times these encounters will involve a high degree of face-work and interactional complexity. It is to these students that a fully communicative syllabus needs to be oriented.

A great deal has been written about the Finnish native- speaker using a foreign language. Putting aside stereotypes, it does appear that certain features can be ascribed to some Finnish native-speakers with respect to rules of communication which are different to those found in other speech communities.

A reluctance to speak a foreign language attributed, in part, to anxiety, has been linked to Finnish-speaking language learners. Ringbom observes: '...the frequent speech anxiety Finnish speakers experience when they speak a language other than their own'. (Ringbom, 1987). Amongst other sources, characteristics specific to the Finnish-speaker have also been described in Hakulinen & Karlsson (1977), Ventola

(1978), Lehtonen (1979, 1981) Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985), Påhlsson (1983), Leino & Kalliokoski (1986), Nyyssönen (1988) and Kärkkäinen & Raudaskoski (1988).

Regardless of why certain characteristics are shared and accepting as fact that they will not be shared by all native-speakers of Finnish, we can attempt to describe features which constitute a Finnish conversational style. It is possible that within the distinctly homogeneous Finnish society such a style is more easily determined than, for example, within the USA, with its huge population and highly heterogeneous social structure.

The question of Finland's homogeneity also adds weight to the need to actively teach the language learner about differences of conversational style. It is clear that an education in parts of California will involve a child interacting with others from a wider range of cultural backgrounds than one, for example, in Northern Finland. Thus, it may be that as the Californian matures more experience is gained in interpreting a range of pragmatic features evident in cross-cultural conversational communication. This is not to advocate that such interaction will be necessarily advantageous, for it cannot be assumed that experience of cultural diversity can be directly linked to acceptance of it. On the contrary, it may fuel the development of prejudice and bias. The point here is that discussion of style is not, at any time, a matter of making qualitative judgements. The teaching of pragmatic appropriateness is only concerned with extending the language learner's sociocultural competence through experiencing alternative ways of expressing meaning in the target language. In addition it must be stressed that one does not need to enter the realm of an alternative culture in order to experience diversity of sociocultural norms, but doing so, through learning a foreign language, does usually involve this occurring.

4. QUESTIONS OF TEACHING PRAGMATIC APPROPRIATENESS

A focus on this area in language learning may lead some to claim that it advocates the teaching of 'interpersonal skills' rather than just language. This refers back to the problem of separating personality and culture mentioned above but we have to accept that when we teach language as communication we are, by definition, involved with interpersonal aspects of communication. In the real world there is no 'ideal speaker-hearer' relationship (Chomsky, 1965) just as there are no completely homogeneous

speech communities. All communication involves tolerating violation of certain cultural and pragmatic conventions, and, indeed part of the richness of a given person's communicative style may depend on intentional violation of certain widely-shared social conventions. In the classroom we don't need to be prescriptive and teach the rights and wrongs of communication in a foreign language. The situation is far too complex for that to be justified. Rather, we need to direct the learner to two things.

Firstly to divert attention towards appropriacy on the sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic levels of language use and move away from short-sighted concentration on 'rights' and 'wrongs'. Secondly, to reduce the significance of that glorified sacred cow, the native-speaker, with respect to teaching pragmatic appropriateness. Kachru observes:'.. the native-speaker has been accepted as a cardinal concept... carrying immense attitudinal and linguistic burdens.' (Kachru, 1988). The native-speaker should not be held as a reliable model for teaching pragmatic appropriateness. I, myself, am hardly alone in having experienced communication with a person of similar background and shared culture only to find facets of their conversational style to be consistently unacceptable or even offensive! When we teach conversational style to Finnish students of English language we do not prescribe ways of behaving in English. This would be wholly unrealistic and exhibit a misunderstanding of both style and the role of English as a world language.

Whereas Finnish language may justifiably be seen to belong to the 0.06% of the world's population that use it and who mostly reside in Finland, English belongs to the 400 million non-native and 350 million native speakers said to actively use the language. Any speaker of English can only have access to and competence in some of the many variations of socio-cultural norms frequently found in the language. This may be hard for the purist to cope with but it is a fact of life and one that must be reflected in language teaching.

It has to be seen that in the past, eurocentricity, amongst other reasons, has provided a comfortable refuge for those who consider that features of English found in certain social circles in a particular country to be superior or purer than others. In the past we have faced this problem with all types of language use ranging from pronunciation to even spelling. It would be equally innane to attempt a prescriptive description of the shared conventions of native-speakers of the global language that English has become. However it is possible to describe those aspects of face-to-face

encounters where a Finnish native-speaker faces difficulties in adjusting to the cultural conventions followed by other speakers who have English as a first or second language.

The only way to determine precisely what these aspects are, other than through mass observation, is to engage in the type of empirical work reported on in Nyyssönen (1988) and Kärkkäinen and Raudaskoski (1988) in which cross-cultural encounters between Finnish students of English and native-speakers of English are analyzed in relation to the students' level of pragmatic competence.

5. ENGLISH FROM ANOTHER ANGLE

Awareness of how conversational styles differ across cultural boundaries also has considerable significance for education of native-speakers of English in learning better control of their own language as a means of communication. It is no accident that universities in both the USA and the UK have started looking closely at the oral abilities of their undergraduates. Whether this is happening as a result of a renewed interest in face-to-face communication reflected in discourse and conversational analysis, through a perceived falling of standards or because of some other reason is open to debate.

In the UK the National Advisory Body on Education, Her Majesty's Inspectorate, in their commentary on degree courses and the University Grants Committee (THES, 1987) have, at different times, recently indicated that graduates are often devoid of oral communication skills. As a result an emphasis on 'oral skills' training is being explored in some British universities. In addition the British Department of Education and Science has recently moved to encourage language teachers to devote greater attention to the behaviour of speakers of a foreign language, their cultures and civilisations (DES, 1985).

In the USA a three-year national project by the Carnegie Foundation (THES, 1987) concluded that the great number of first-year students who lacked basic oral skills in English should undergo intensive remedial English teaching prior to commencing their tertiary-level studies. Please note that this sort of comment is about predominantly monolingual North American speakers of English!

Admittedly it will not solely be due to pragmatic inappropriacy that certain educated native-speakers of English are described as 'verbally illiterate' but

awkwardness in the use of language as an efficient tool for conveying information and developing social relationships does play an important role here. If a student is expected to but cannot perform appropriately in the given situation then he/she is pragmatically inadequate.

The Finnish student who can perform satisfactorily in the mother tongue does not need to learn different rules of speaking in order to adopt them wholesale but rather become aware of how such rules differ across cultural boundaries and use this insight to become a more efficient communicator in the target language. However it would be short-sighted to deny that insight into the sociocultural conventions of another speech community will not provide the learner with a Pandora's Box which, once opened, may have influence on his/her use of the mother-tongue.

6. FEATURES OF STYLES SPECIFIC TO FINNISH-SPEAKERS WHICH MAY DIFFER TO CONVENTIONS IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITIES

If we take a Finnish tertiary-level LSP student who possesses at least a basic proficiency in spoken English and monitor which difficulties he/she faces in interpersonal communication with a non-Finnish speaker of English, we can compile a list of features which range from the sociological through to grammatical. Non-linguistic features such as those which are kinesic or paralinguistic and intonation are also areas to which attention should be drawn in the LSP curriculum. However, particular emphasis should be directed towards the more sociologically-oriented features as these are likely to be of greater significance in the interpretation of cross-cultural communication.

Admittedly should the student go on to communicate with speakers of English from certain cultures which are distant to those of the West with regard to kinesic signalling, such as in China or Southeast Asia, then non-verbal language will be significant. But a little background reading, combined with intelligence and tolerance should ensure that crossed signals in non-verbal language will not have a profound effect on the attitudes of speakers or outcome of an interaction. However this may not be the case for features which lie predominantly in the sociological domain and which involve sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic rules.

One point crucial to this discussion is that talk of styles embedded in culture denies the significance of the ways in which all people adjust their communication according to the situation they find themselves in at a given time. Tannen sums this point up succinctly: 'the workings of conversational style are relative processes, not objective behaviours' (Tannen, 1984:4)

6 (a) The Sociolinguistic Domain

The circumstances under which it is appropriate to speak or remain silent appear to vary between some English (E) and Finnish (F) native-speakers. It has been suggested that (F) has a high degree of respect for the individuality of others and pays attention to guarding his own in spoken interaction. This would make (F) appear reluctant to speak in situations in which there is significant social distance between participants. However, in situations in which participants can be regarded as have a close relationship and some degree of intimacy, then a high or low degree of speaking could be expected.

On the contrary, (E) may see talk as a basic means for 'getting to know people' and not feel as hesitant as (F) about being assertive with relative strangers and 'pushing into their space'. Thus, we find that in situations in which a high degree of social distance exists between participants, (E) may believe it more justifiable than (F) to talk at length.

Questions of social distance and power may be of particular significance in Finnish-English cross-cultural communication. If we take, as an example, pedagogic norms found in higher education then we can envisage the following scenario: (E) believes that the higher status person, in this case the lecturer, is supposed to listen and judge the performance of subordinates in certain educational situations, such as the seminar. Thus we can find (E) as the subordinate speaker attempting to actively participate in the seminar, even if he is desperately unsure of his topic, in order that he may exhibit his abilities to the lecturer.

In contrast (F) has been brought up with the view that the high status person should transmit information, which, (F) the subordinate, needs to know in order that he may ultimately achieve his educational goals. "Who am I," wonders (F) "to take up university contact-time by talking when I don't know as much about the subject as my

lecturer?" Thus, in this specific context the subordinate is likely to be taciturn as a direct result of perceived power relations.

A feature which may be sociolinguistic and is frequently prominent on the strategic level of (E)'s speech because of the use of linguistic formulae such as certain gambits (cf. Keller, 1979), concerns projection of self. It appears that frequent use of first person singular forms in gambits are used less frequently by (F) than (E). Whereas (E) may appear arrogant and possibly boastful to (F), through apparantly referring to himself a great deal, the converse may also be true with (E) regarding (F) as rather withdrawn and reluctant to attempt to communicate on an intimate level. A particularly interesting discussion on this area can be found in Kärkkäinen and Raudaskoski (1988).

Silence and Finnish speakers has been discussed elsewhere (cf. Lehtonen & Sajavaara, 1985) but it may be apt to include one observation on this subject. It appears that (F) will avoid expressing disagreement in talk whilst (E) may actually encourage the development of 'argumentative discourse'. (F) may hold the view that silence is preferable to conflict and that the invitation of conflict, through the expression of strong opinions, can evoke a backlash and should be avoided unless the subject is of particular importance. If this importance is recognised then (F) will express an opinion but may be more reluctant than (E) to argue a point.

Perhaps the anxiety noted by Ringbom (1987) and mentioned above can be attributed to a concept of hyper-correctness which is developed or reinforced throughout the Finnish school system. It is not a wholly unfounded joke to describe a type of English speaker who, on knowing twenty words of French, will happily admit: "Yes, I speak French!" This is contrary to a Finnish observation on life summed up in the proverb: 'One swallow doesn't make a summer'.

It is possible that the wish to be particularly good at something does influence the degree of confidence that (F) has when he uses spoken English. This would contrast to the often monolingual (E) who is likely 'to plunge in' with a poor command of a language, or, more commonly, expect the non-native speaker to use English language.

Finally, we should consider the following anecdote: 'What do we call a person who speaks three languages? A trilingual. What do we call a person who speaks two languages? A bilingual. What do we call a person who speaks one language? An

American'. Putting aside any unfairness in picking on North Americans here, it is necessary to consider the degree of tolerance that any speech community exhibits towards languages which are not its own. Some cultures may be described as having greater or less tolerance than others.

For example the United States has been described as 'extremely intolerant of foreign speech, perhaps because it is a nation of immigrants who have shown their Americanness by learning English (Haines, 1985). Finland may be described as showing a high degree of tolerance which, if it is the case, may be the result of bilingualism or other socio-historical factors. For example, it has been noted that some foreigners live in Finland for many years without acquiring a working knowledge of either of its national languages.

The question we should consider is whether the levels of tolerance held within a speech community towards other languages also influences the ways in which its members perceive different socio-cultural conventions. Is it possible that in a low-tolerance speech community (F) needs to be more cautious in adjusting to cultural norms than in a high-tolerance community?

6 (b) The Discourse Domain

Here we focus on how individual message elements are interpreted in relation to their place in the overall discourse structure of any given stretch of talk. For example directness and indirectness may be handled differently by (E) and (F) in spoken interaction. This may be related to a failure by (F) to perceive the topic in a stretch of talk by (E). Questions of directness are a complex issue which is only being noted here as possibly having some bearing on a difference between (E) and (F) in the handling of phatic communication in conversation.

In addition the use of irony has been commented upon as causing misunderstandings in Finnish-English cross-cultural communication. Although the use of 'pyydan kohteliaimmin' ('I'm asking you most politely') is a frequently cited example in this respect, there are instances where (E) and (F) may follow quite different conventions in their use of irony in communication.

Certain differences in the handling of adjacency pairs such as in apologies, compliments or thanking, may be significantly different for (E) and (F).

Finally, the role of intonation as a conveyer of meaning should be included in this domain. However a rather limited understanding of the ways in which discourse intonation functions prevents this from going beyond a description of some characteristic features of the intonation of (E) and (F). The significance of this in terms of misinterpreting intention in cross-cultural communication is probably not as great as with the handling of verbal, and to some extent, non-verbal language. How justifiable such a claim is remains to be seen, but it can be argued that people are more tolerant towards differences in intonation than those, for example, on the level of discourse.

6 (c) The Strategic Domain

The coping strategies employed by (E) and (F) appear to differ in a number of respects which may include, in some cases, non-verbal features of language.

The initiation and termination of talk, turn-taking procedures, means for maintenance and repair in talk, and ability to orientate talk through, for example, re-directing topic, may be relevant areas to be cosidered here. A failure by (F) to control the topic in talk may be partly the result of his being taciturn for some of the sociolinguistic reasons cited above. However the reason for this happening may lie in a difference of approach to the strategic components of the two languages.

One particularly obvious problem on the strategic level relates to the deliberate use of interruption by (E) which is contrary to what (F) would consider appropriate in a wide range of situations. In addition the greater acceptance by (F) towards silence as an integral element in social interaction may directly conflict with (E)'s tendancy, in certain situations, to perceive its existence as a sign of breakdown or failure. This is particularly the case with those situations which are high in social distance.

The use of backchannel signals differs on verbal and non-verbal levels in terms of frequency. Finnish signals such as 'joo', 'aivan' or 'kylla' do not seem to be used as frequently in as wide range of situations, as those common to English talk. In terms of non-verbal behaviour it has been noted that (F) is likely to be less overt in his backchannel signalling than (E). This may be witnessed through a reduced frequency of explicit turn-taking signals being used by (F) such as through eye-contact and gesture.

7. Conclusion

This paper has, without apology, plunged into the question of accepting the fruits or burdens of generalisations about speech communities and socio-cultural communicative conventions in order to raise questions of what we could do when teaching a foreign language to educated adults whose academic training necessitates LSP.

The notion of 'conversational style' helps us convey to the LSP student that a characteristic way of talking, though different to a degree between all people, can be associated with a specific speech community. The paper advocates teaching means with which the student may attain socio-cultural competence in the target language, but stresses that it is unrealistic to be prescriptive about a given speech community. Rather, it argues that when the Finn communicates in English with native and native-speakers, we can predict what types of problems may arise through misinterpretation of intention and draw attention to these in the language learning curriculum.

The LSP university student is likely to be receptive to the sort of analytic approach to the foreign language that is advocated here. The training of an analytic mind is, after all, one of the objectives of a university education. If we actively involve the student in 'doing discourse analysis' in the classroom and beyond (cf. DiPietro, 1987) we may achieve more than simply adding an important module to the curriculum; we may be evoking a genuinely intellectual interest into how language, both mother tongue and other, is an extraordinarily subtle but powerful phenomenon in human interaction.

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